

7 Questions to Ask When Hiring a White Paper Writer

A CopyEngineer “What to Look For” Guide

By John Cole





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Introduction

When it comes to making purchasing decisions, technology buyers consistently rank the white paper as the most sought-after, most shared, and most influential of all forms of marketing collateral.*

But creating an effective white paper is no easy feat. White papers generally require more research, greater subject matter knowledge, and more journalistic skill than any other content form.

Which can make finding a good white paper writer a tough task, especially in high-tech markets.

That's why I've created this list of seven questions to ask when interviewing a freelance white paper writer. Each has been crafted to dig out the key information you'll want to consider when hiring one.

** According to surveys by Eccolo Mediaⁱ, TechTargetⁱⁱ and KnowledgeStorm/MarketingSherpaⁱⁱⁱ.*

Question #1: Could you tell me a bit about your career background?

What you're trying to find out with this first question is this: *Is this writer capable of understanding our offering and our audience?*

Naturally, this is a major concern in high-tech industries. Your white paper needs to sound convincing to your target audience. So, your white paper writer must be able to speak to your target readers in a peer-to-peer fashion. He or she needs to speak their language. This can be extremely difficult for writers whose background doesn't match up well with your industry.

This doesn't mean they need experience in your specific industry or market. If your company competes in a narrow niche, such a criterion could make it virtually impossible to find a qualified writer.

What it *does* mean is that the white paper writer you choose should have a background that will help him or her understand your product or service and relate to your target reader.

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Question #2: What experience have you had writing for technology companies?

Most qualified white paper writers come from one of two backgrounds. They'll either have a technical background and have transitioned to marketing and writing, or they'll have a writing background *and* experience in writing for technology companies.

So this question serves as follow-up to the previous one.

If the writer you're speaking with boasts a technical background, their answer to your first question probably established whether or not they can cope with your offering and audience. Now you want to find out what kind of track record they have in writing marketing content.

If, on the other hand, your interviewee comes from a more traditional writing background, their answer to your first question *might not* have told you whether they can communicate effectively with your SMEs and understand your product, services and market. This second question is designed to fill in those blanks.

Again, it's usually not so important that they've written for your specific market. It's far more important that they're able to communicate effectively with your SMEs, so they can gather the information they need quickly, and so they don't need a lot of hand-holding afterward.

Question #3: What kind of white papers have you written?

What you're trying to find out with this question is pretty straightforward: *Does this writer have experience in writing white papers?*

They don't necessarily need to have written a lot of them, but they should have at least a couple under their belt. They need to have had some experience with the process.

How much experience will depend upon your situation and needs.

If you're in a highly competitive space—one where it's difficult to differentiate your company from the competition—you may want a highly experienced white paper specialist or a writer who's very familiar with your market.

If you're in an extremely specialized technical niche, on the other hand, you'll want to be sure your writer can relate easily to your SMEs, your technology and your prospects. In this case, it might pay to favor a technical background over portfolio size.

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Also bear in mind that while a more experienced writer may offer greater advice and faster results, a newer white paper writer will likely ask a much lower fee. Plus, you may have to wait months for that big-name writer to become available.

Question #4: Could you send us some samples of white papers you've written?

You need to read some white papers the writer has authored. You want to find out: *Is this writer capable of keeping our readers engaged?*

Read parts of two or more. You don't need to read every word. But do check for the following:

- Does the writer have an engaging tone?
 - Is the tone conversational?
 - Does it sound like an expert talking peer-to-peer with another professional?
- Is the paper easy to read?
 - Are the sentences clear?
 - Are paragraphs mostly short?
- Does the writer cite plenty of third-party evidence to back up his/her claims?
- Does the writer provide good examples and illustrations that make concepts clear?

You want to find out: Is this writer capable of keeping our readers engaged?

If your white paper lacks an engaging voice, readers won't be compelled to read to the end... or heed your call to action.

Question #5: What kind of white paper would you suggest for us?

This question assumes you have a particular objective in mind. This is always best, as it gives your writer something specific to focus on. It will keep them from bouncing back and forth between hypothetical scenarios. If you don't yet have a specific project in mind, suggest an objective.

What you're trying to learn here is: *Is this writer able to propose the right kind of white paper for our objectives?*

If you want to generate leads, for example, your best bet is a classic **problem/solution** white paper, or a **numbered list** with a problem-solving focus. (See [this article](#), and [this one](#), for more information on different types of white papers.)

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At the opposite end of your funnel, if your sales team needs a tool to help close deals, you probably want a **backgrounder**, which will describe just how your prospect can achieve splendid results using your product or service in a specific application.

In other cases, a simple numbered list will often be your best choice. Not only are they [the most versatile of white papers](#), they also tend to be [the fastest and least expensive white papers to create](#).

But remember, this is not a quiz! You're not looking for the writer to give you a "correct" answer. Just listen to what he or she proposes, and see if it makes sense to you.

Question #6: What's your process, and how do we work together?

Once you've determined that a prospective white paper writer can understand your product and market and is capable of putting together a decent white paper, there's still one more thing you need to find out...

Is this writer able to deliver what we need in a reasonable time? In other words: Will they deliver our white paper when they say they will?

And the best way to do determine that, is to find out:

- Do they have a process?
- Can they describe that process?
- Does that process make sense to us?

Having a process means the writer is methodical, organized and thinks logically. It also significantly reduces the likelihood that the writer will get bogged down, fall behind schedule, and slip your delivery date. So, you'll know what to expect.

Having a process... significantly reduces the likelihood that the writer will get bogged down, fall behind schedule, and slip your delivery date.

What makes a good white paper writing process? Here are three things to look for:

Seeks input early. Right at the start of the project, the writer should begin gathering input from you, your SMEs, and possibly your sales staff. She should ask for background materials and set up interviews right at the outset to guide further research. You and your team are their best source of information, but they'll need outside sources as well.

Submits an outline for approval. Shortly after completing her interviews, your writer should submit an outline for the paper and solicit your feedback. They should make sure you're happy with their concept before they begin writing the paper itself.

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3 things to look for in a white paper writing process:

- 1. Seeks input early.*
- 2. Submits an outline for approval.*
- 3. Solicits comments and provides revisions.*

Solicits comments and provides revisions. The writer should submit a polished draft for your review and then provide revisions – according to your instructions – until you are satisfied with their results.

These three steps will help assure you get just what you need in your finished white paper.

Question #7: What else can you offer us once this white paper is complete?

What you want to find out with this last question depends upon what you need, and what in-house capabilities you already have on hand. Those factors will also impact the wording of this question.

If you're looking to generate leads, for example, you might ask, "How can you help us promote this white paper?" In that case, you'll want to listen to what this writer can offer in terms of advertising, direct mail, email marketing, and landing page writing to support your white paper campaign.

If you're looking to get maximum mileage out of your white paper, you might ask, "How can you help us re-use this content?" Or, if you frequently need outside copywriting help, you might ask, "What other types of projects do you do?"

Asking this question – in any form – can help you get more for your money. Freelance writers frequently offer discounts when related projects are purchased as a package or as immediate follow-ons.

3 ways to ask this last question:

- 1. How can you help us promote this white paper?*
- 2. How can you help us re-use this content?*
- 3. What other types of projects do you do?*

Conclusion

By asking these seven questions of a prospective white paper writer – and quickly reviewing some of their work – you should get a pretty good idea of whether or not they can do the job, whether or not they're a good fit for your company, and what else they can offer you.

So the next time you interview a white paper writer, ask these seven questions.

And be sure to contact CopyEngineer to get my answers.

Next Steps...

Need some outside help creating a new white paper? Email CopyEngineer at info@copyengineer.com. Or give me a call at **(+39) 334 855 0474**.

If you're interested in learning more about how to improve the performance of your white paper campaigns, you'll want

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a copy of my free special report, **10 Common Mistakes that Kill White Paper ROI: How to Avoid Them and Generate More Leads**. You can request yours at: www.copyengineer.com/10-common-mistakes.

About the Author

John Cole, the CopyEngineer, is a freelance business-to-business copywriter specializing in lead-generation and demand-generation content for the technology, software and aerospace industries.

Before shifting his career focus to marketing, John worked 20 years in the aerospace industry as an avionic systems engineer and project manager. He now combines his extensive hands-on technical experience with skills in direct response and B2B copywriting to help high-tech companies generate more quality leads, and move those leads down the sales funnel.



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WORKSHEET:

7 QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN HIRING A WHITE PAPER WRITER

This worksheet lists the 7 questions you'll want to ask when interviewing a white paper writer, and (*in italics*) what you're trying to find out with each one.

1. Could you tell me a bit about your career background?

Is this writer capable of understanding our offering and our audience?

2. What experience have you had writing for technology companies?

Is this writer's experience relevant to our needs?

3. What kind of white papers have you written?

Does this writer have experience in writing white papers?

4. Could you send us some samples of white papers you've written?

Is this writer capable of keeping our readers engaged?

5. What kind of white paper would you suggest for us?

Does this writer have experience in writing white papers?

6. What's your process, and how do we work together?

Is this writer able to deliver what we need in a reasonable time?

7. What else can you offer us once this white paper is complete?

How can we get more for our money, using this writer?

3 ways to ask the last question:

- 1. How can you help us promote this white paper?*
- 2. How can you help us re-use this content?*
- 3. What other types of projects do you do?*



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